# The Rebel Alliance

Why Syria's Armed Opposition Has Failed to Unify

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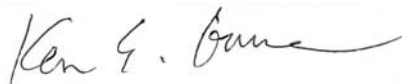
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# Contents

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# Executive Summary

The issues that motivate Syria's rebel groups and shape inter-rebel interactions can be challenging to identify. To better understand these dynamics, this report investigates the question: Why have Syria's Sunni Arab rebels failed to unify? We first address this issue by exploring the literature on rebel group interactions in the context of civil wars. This literature stresses two factors—a group's goals and resource levels—in how rebel groups decide to cooperate, ignore, or compete with their rebel counterparts. In general, groups with similar goals and resources are more likely to interact but less likely to develop deep alliances. Groups with similar goals and differing levels of resources are more likely to develop deep ties, as the smaller group might be willing to sacrifice some of its autonomy for greater access to resources. Groups with divergent goals are less likely to develop deep ties and more likely to compete, especially if they have asymmetric resource levels.

We use this framework to examine how goals and resources could be affecting rebel alliance building in Syria. We first identify the major segments of the Sunni Arab rebellion and discuss their key goals. We then discuss how rebel groups have acquired resources through the external support of foreign states and wealthy private donors. We then analyze how divergent goals and resource levels appear to have influenced rebel alliance building and the rebellion during the first year of the armed conflict (January 2012–February 2013). Finally, we discuss what the trends in alliance building could mean for the future of the Syrian civil war and its aftermath.

Our analysis suggests several key trends in alliance building among Syria's rebels:

- Divergent goals and resources have likely played a significant role in determining how and to what extent rebel groups in Syria interact.

- Differing short-term goals have in part led to the abundance of small groups and their often parochial agendas.

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- Differing goals have affected not only how groups see each other but also how outside donors see them.

- The ability to gain access to resources via wealthy private donors has had the effect of encouraging rebel forces to divide into smaller and smaller independent groups.

- Salafis have been the most successful at attracting private support which has given them an edge over other rebel factions in resource procurement.

- Shared long-term goals and greater access to resources from private donors have encouraged more credible alliance building among Salafi militants than among their more divided secular rebel counterparts.

Theoretical literature leads us to make four observations on how trends in rebel alliance building could impact the future of conflict in Syria:

- The presence of multiple groups with low levels of cooperation and independent access to external support could lengthen the duration of the Syrian conflict.

- Rebel victory will prove more difficult without the development of deeper alliances. The failure to establish strong credible alliances could also lead to more post-conflict instability should the rebels defeat Asad.

- Access to higher levels of resources would have the most significant impact on the conflict and would make rebel victory more likely.

- However, the presence of greater resources could also create more competition between rebel groups, especially between those with divergent goals and asymmetric resources levels.

A note on sources: Due to the fogginess of civil war in Syria, it is impossible to determine the veracity of reports coming out of the country. With the conflict still relatively young, we have depended largely on on-the-ground reporting and interviews with rebel leaders, commanders, and soldiers by journalists; eyewitness statements; and public statements by rebel groups, either through traditional media channels or through their official websites and social network pro-

files. In addition to these primary sources, we have benefited from the theoretical insights provided by an array of literature on civil wars, rebel alliance building, and the impact of external funding on insurgencies. We have also consulted other analytical treatments on Syria's rebel groups and more general historical literature on Syria.

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The longer it takes, the more groups and agendas get involved, and the more people from outside complicate our battles. The longer it takes, the more complex it becomes.

— Abd al-Aziz, a commander in the Free Syrian Army[1]

# Introduction

Syria has been ravaged by armed conflict. The militarized struggle that has pitted rebel groups against the Baathist government has caused hundreds of thousands of families to be displaced, destroyed entire neighborhoods in important urban centers, and sharply divided Syrian society along sectarian, ethnic, and political lines. Although the opposition to Bashar al-Asad's regime has grown to include a multitude of groups, it has failed to cohere into a unified bloc. To a large extent, the divisions within the opposition reflect those latent within Syrian society itself; however, they are also deeply rooted in the complex dynamics of civil war.

This report asks the question: Why have Syrian rebel forces failed to unify? Although the Syrian opposition has been able to establish a number of factions, committees, and institutions in name, it remains seriously divided both outside and inside the country. There is perhaps no better evidence of this than the sheer number and highly fractured nature of armed rebel groups and gangs operating on the ground in Syria. Indeed, the trend for some armed groups has been not to unite but rather to further divide into smaller battalions, each with an independent commander focused on attracting outside funding and support.[2]

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[1] Sheera Frenkel, "'We could be at war for ever,'" *New York Times*, 25 August 2012.

[2] See Gaith Abdul-Ahad's reporting from Aleppo, "How to Start a Battalion (in Five Easy Lessons)," *London Review of Books*, 14 February 2013.

To help answer our question, we examine the literature on rebel alliance building and the importance of rebel group interactions to civil war outcomes. This literature stresses two key factors in how groups decide to either cooperate or compete with each other: goals and resources. Goals are the ideas and issues that motivate a group's actions and drive its decision-making. While most rebel groups in a civil war share the immediate goal of toppling the government, many disagree on what system should replace it. Resources are the weapons, infrastructure, networks, and funds that provide a group with the means to subsist and fight in an armed conflict. In general, shared goals between groups can help facilitate cooperation, whereas divergent goals can drive competition. Resource levels are also a consideration. As cooperation invariably dilutes a group's autonomy, the incentive toward working with other outfits tends to be driven by a group's desire to gain access to greater resources. For this reason, groups with differing access to resources but shared goals are more likely to cooperate with one another than groups with similar resources and goals.

We use these theoretical insights to help us understand how goals and resources have shaped rebel dynamics in Syria over a year of the armed rebellion (from January 2012 through January 2013). There are hundreds if not thousands of small groups that have been active in the Syrian civil war, nearly countless of which have split or changed alliances, political outlook, or leadership over time.[3] Tracking these grassroots interactions would be an endless, if not impossible task. So we approach the issue from a broader perspective. Our attention is focused on what we view as the four major elements of the *Sunni Arab* rebellion: Salafi militants (including jihadists); groups associated with the Muslim Brotherhood; amorphous Islamists (i.e., Islamist groups

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[3] For instance, the Syrian Islamic Front, a major Salafi faction, claims to have 11 regional brigades comprising over 125 smaller battalion groups operating throughout Syria under its umbrella. See SIF's official charter at http://www.facebook.com/Islamic.Syrian.Front/posts/13600468989421 8; a translation of the Arabic charter can be found here: http://abujamajem.wordpress.com/2013/01/29/the-charter-of-the-syrian-islamic-front/. Also see Aaron Zelin, "The Syrian Front's Order of Battle," 22 January 2013, http://thewasat.wordpress.com/2013/01/22/syrian-islamic-fronts-order-of-battle/.

that bear no clear affiliation with Salafi or Brotherhood ideology and leadership); and secularists. The armed rebellion also includes non-Sunni Arab groups, such as those consisting of Kurdish or Druze fighters; however, the place of these groups within the opposition is more contested and beyond the scope of this paper. [4]

To understand what might motivate or undermine alliance building among these groups, we begin our report by reviewing the literature relevant to rebel alliance building. Here we introduce a typology of rebel group dynamics and identify causes of rebel disunity. This discussion provides the methodological framework that we will use to analyze alliance building in the Syrian conflict. Next we identify the major elements of the Sunni Arab rebellion and briefly discuss the general goals of each segment, including their known ideological, religious, and/or political objectives. We then discuss how and to what extent these elements have gained access to resources through external funding and how this has changed over time. In the Syrian context, a group's resources are largely defined by the level and type of access that the group has to external sponsors. This is because rebel groups have been largely reliant on foreign support to provide the money and weapons needed to sustain the fight against the Asad regime. This has made external funding the most important determining factor of a rebel group's resource level and a central factor in shaping the rebellion. From there, we move on to analyze how the differences in goals and resources between groups have factored into the alliance building within Syria's rebellion. Finally, we draw on some of the core insights of the literature and our analysis to explore possible prospects for rebel alliances and conflict in Syria.

## Rebel alliances in civil wars

Civil wars often involve a variety of armed rebel groups fighting a government. While these groups might share an immediate common purpose—to topple the government—they can also have conflicting ideas of what should come next. The existence of a diverse opposition comprising multiple groups can give strength to both individual

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[4] For more on Kurdish groups in the Syrian conflict, see the International Crisis Group, "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within," *Middle East Report* no. 136, 22 January 2013.

groups and to the overall rebellion. Seden Ackinaroglu argues: "Being one of many groups fighting the government increases the relative strength of each group… [and] reduces the resources the government can allocate for defeating each group."[5] However, divisions within the opposition, in terms of both political disagreements and resource inequities, can undermine the effectiveness of rebel forces. That is, while a government might find it difficult to fight multiple groups simultaneously, it can better manage the conflict if its enemy is divided.

Still, strong alliances between rebel groups can give the opposition the upper hand. Ackinaroglu posits that having "credible" alliances between rebel groups increases the effectiveness of their armed campaign and decreases the likelihood of a government victory. Alliances enable groups to coordinate operations, share intelligence, open up trusted (i.e., *credible*) lines of communication between group leaders and operators, and share crucial resources. While alliances embolden an opposition, they also prolong the duration of the conflict by making a government victory more difficult. Rebel groups that are able to form credible alliances *and* gain access to high-level resources and capabilities are more likely to be victorious against a government in a civil war.[6]

If inter-group alliances strengthen a rebellion and increase its chances of victory over a government, why are they so difficult to form? What factors serve to motivate or discourage ties among rebel groups? Are certain rebel groups more inclined to develop credible ties with their peers? These are some of the questions tackled by Christine Furtado in her work on anti-government rebellions in South Asia. Furtado links a group's decision-making regarding cooperating with other groups to two main factors: a group's goals and its resources. In this typology, goals include the politics, ideology, ethnicity, religion, regional preferences, or parochial interests that motivate a group's behavior and help define its near- and long-term objectives. A group's goals are generally not fixed, but rather can change over

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[5] Seden Ackinaroglu, "Rebel Interdependencies and Civil War Outcomes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 5 (2012): 900.

[6] Ibid.

time and in reaction to shifting conflict dynamics. Resources include the finances, materiel, social networks, infrastructure, foreign assistance (e.g., funding, military supplies, the provision of safe-havens, etc.), and technologies that can strengthen a rebel group's armed campaign against its enemies. Whereas goals help define an organization and "drive its strategic choices," resources determine a group's "ability to sustain conflict" and its approach to "recruitment, size, and structure."[7]

Rebel groups can deal with one another in several ways. Furtado identifies five types of inter-group interactions, providing a lens for understanding levels of commitment or contention among rebel groups. (See table 1.)

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[7] Christina S. Furtado, "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation and Competition the case of South Asia," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007, pp. 23-26.

Table 1. Types of inter-group interactions[a]

| Competition | "Interactions among groups characterized by violence…groups indulge in either spoiling or outbidding." |
|---|---|
| Cordial alliance | "characterized by mutual tolerance…achieved tacitly or through an explicit agreement not to target force at each other." |
| Cooperative alliance | "groups form a united front for joint participation in negotiations with the government…involves a higher level of cooperation than cordial alliances, but groups do not necessarily concede control over their forces or resources." |
| Coordination alliance | "groups cooperate with each other to conduct joint operations against the state or conduct joint training operations, but do not merge their command and control structures." |
| Militarized alliance | "involves the unification of forces and integration of command and control structures…the total merger of one group into another…" |

a. Furtado, "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics," pp. 32-33.

This typology describes the spectrum of inter-group relations from outright hostility (*competition*) to complete unification or merger (*militarized alliance*). Although competition between groups is common, Furtado suggests that *cooperative* and *coordination* alliances are generally as far as most rebel groups will go in forging relations with others.[8]

Because opposition groups cannot enforce the agreements they make with one another, Furtado suggests that they are "more likely" to cooperate with groups they consider to be able to make a "credible commitment." One group determines the credibility of a prospective partner by evaluating the similarities and disparities between that group's goals and resources and its own. Furtado emphasizes the role of shared or divergent goals in determining inter-group behavior. Rebel groups see shared goals as "an indicator of credibility," which is

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[8] Ibid., pp. 162-63.

why groups with similar worldviews and aspirations are more likely to engage in "deeper levels of cooperation" than groups with differing perspectives. Likewise, groups with highly divergent views are more likely to compete than to cooperate with one another.[9]

Access to resources is also an important determining factor. Groups with unequal access to resources, but similar goals, are more likely to cooperate than groups with similar resources and goals. This is primarily because stronger groups with more resources are more "capable of imposing heavy costs" on a partner group should the latter renege on an agreement. By making such agreements, the stronger group is able to expand its network while decreasing the number of potential competitors. And by aligning itself with a stronger partner, the weaker group is able to strengthen its position, avoid competing with a more formidable rival, and gain access to higher levels of resources—all of which could be a sufficient incentive even if cooperation means having less autonomy. Groups with similar goals and access to resources can cooperate; however, without gaining access to greater resources or forming ties with a stronger ally, they generally lack sufficient incentive to do so and are less inclined to "give up higher levels of control over their groups to forge deeper alliances."[10]

In the Syrian context, forming ties of patronage to foreign governments and wealthy private donors is crucial for gaining access to higher levels of resources. This is also true for rebel groups engaged in civil wars more broadly. For instance, in his work on transnational insurgencies, Idean Salehyan demonstrates how the support provided to rebel groups by neighboring states strengthens rebellions and increases the duration of civil war.[11] Similarly, Paul Staniland, writing on insurgent organizations, argues that external support is "crucial" for groups battling a capable government because it enables rebels to gain access to large amounts of resources and funding in a context

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., pp. 157-58.

[11] Idean Salehyan, *Rebels Without Borders: Transnational Insurgencies in World Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), pp. 166-67.

where the state has a significant infrastructural advantage.[12] He adds that for groups that lack "access to drugs or mineral wealth, the only viable means of acquiring significant wealth and materiel comes from state sponsors and diasporas outside the war zone."[13] As external support provides groups with high levels of resources, it allows them to attract and retain more fighters and helps stabilize and centralize organizational leadership. This in turn encourages group cohesion and effectiveness. Alternatively, the "absence of external support" can undermine a group's cohesion, weaken military effectiveness, and make the group vulnerable to competition with stronger rivals.[14]

## Syria's armed rebel forces

As we have seen, goals play an important role in determining how groups come together or compete in a civil war context. This is the case with the Syrian rebels. (For a general map of the Syrian conflict, including some of the areas of operation of the groups mentioned in this report, see figure 1.) During the past year of armed conflict in Syria, the vast majority of those rebelling against Bashar al-Asad have been Sunni Arabs—which is unsurprising, given that they constitute the majority of the country but do not control the levers of power. Although the Sunni Arab rebels share the common goal of overthrowing the Asad regime, they diverge on what the political order should be once they remove Asad from power. Although regional, local, and personal differences undoubtedly account for many of their disagreements, it is their differing opinions on the role of religion in a post-Asad state that most clearly divides them.[15]

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[12] Paul Staniland, "Explaining Cohesion, Fragmentation, and Control in Insurgent Groups," Ph.D. dissertation. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2010, pp. 11-12.

[13] Ibid., p. 15.

[14] Ibid, pp. 15-16.

[15] On how regional differences among Sunni Arabs has in part shaped the modern Syrian state see, Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle For Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996).

Figure 1. General map of the Syrian rebellion
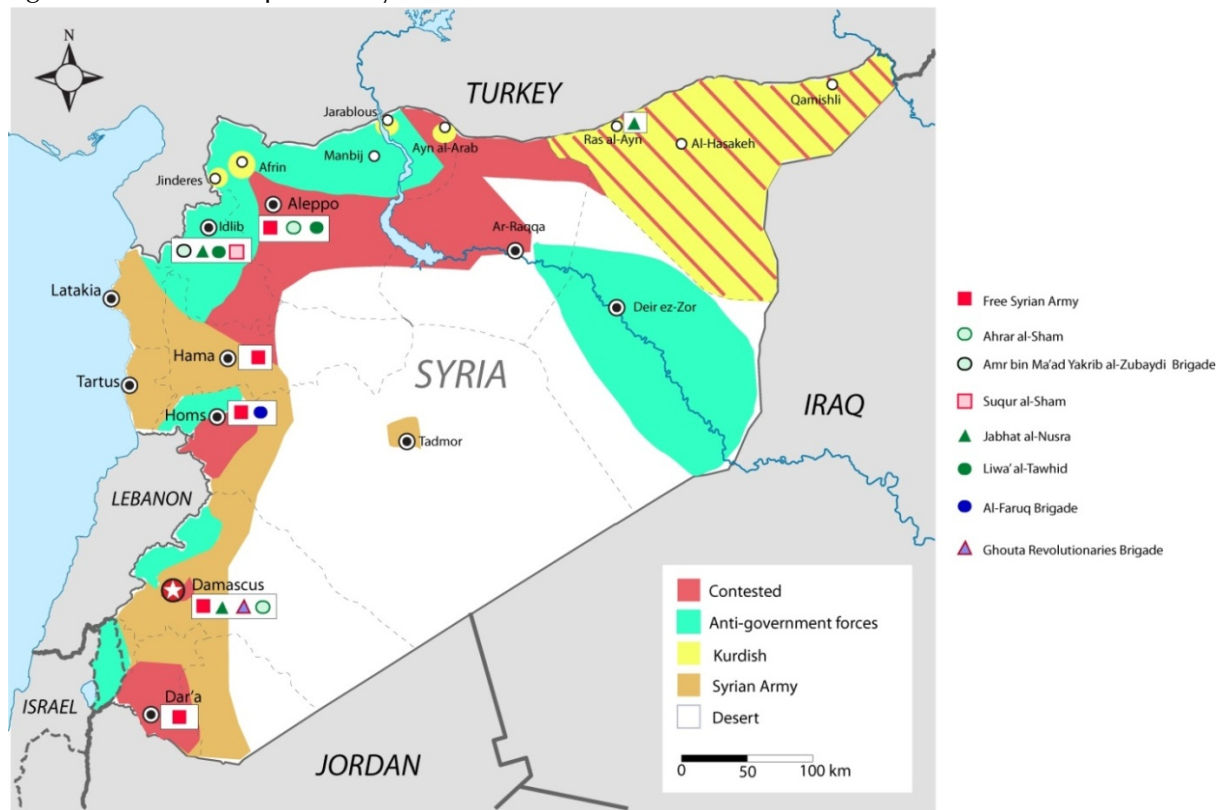


On the extreme right of the discussion are the Salafi rebels, who want to see Islam become the sole source of law and cultural identity in Syria. However, the Salafis, which include jihadists, differ among themselves over how to achieve this.[16] Of the largest and most important Salafi groups, Al-Qaeda's Nusra Front wants an Islamic emirate established immediately through armed force. It rejects a democratic process for creating a state.[17] In contrast, the group Ahrar al-Sham wants to see an Islamic state established through a political process involving all Syria's citizens. If the right outcome is not achieved, the group has indicated that it will respect the wishes of the

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[16] For a more on the Salafi presence in the Syrian rebellion, see International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition," *Middle East Report* no. 131, 12 October 2012.

[17] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-I`lan `an Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham," 25 January 2012 (http://forums.moheet.com/showthread.php?t=290232).

majority while working to peacefully change their minds.[18] To help bolster its agenda, Ahrar al-Sham has joined several other like-minded groups to form the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), an independent bloc established as a Salafi alternative to other major rebel umbrella organizations like the Free Syrian Army (a loose coalition of anti-regime forces headed by former Syrian military officers).[19]

To the left of the Salafis are the more amorphous Islamist groups that have no clear political ideology or religious creed but express a desire for Islam to be the primary source of law and cultural identity in Syria. One such group is the Faruq Brigades in Homs, which has joined with similar groups, such as Suqur al-Sham in Idlib, to form the Front to Liberate Syria (FLS). Like the Syrian Islamic Front, the FLS was established as an umbrella organization independent from the Free Syrian Army (FSA)—it claims 40,000 fighters, roughly half the estimated number of fighters currently fighting against Asad.[20] However, groups that have ideological positions outwardly similar to those of groups in FLS have also been aligned with the FSA. These include Islamist groups, such as the Amr bin Ma'ad Yakrib al-Zubaydi Brigade in Idlib province, which remains a part of the FSA.

To the left of the amorphous Islamist rebels is the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, also known as Ikhwanis. The Syrian Brotherhood's political ideology is more inclusive than that of the Islamists to their

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[18] Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham, "Hal ataka hadith al-Kata'ib?" ("Has the Story of the Brigades Reached You?"), 4 June 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCb-ObhRsWk.

[19] "Mithaq Jabhat Thuwwar Suriyya" ("Charter of the Syrian Revolutionaries Front"), 23 July 2012 (7/23/2012), http://www.srfront.org/?p=108. In the "Charter of the Syrian Revolutionaries Front," an umbrella organization in which ASB plays the largest role, the Salafi militia repeats its aim to overthrow the Asad regime and establish Islamic rule. Its goals include implementing Islamic law, maintaining the unity of the Syrian population and territory, complying with international treaties that do not violate Islamic law Sharia, uniting the rebel groups under a single banner, coordinating with all parties working to topple the regime, and assisting politically and administratively during the transition time after the fall of the regime.

[20] Mariam Karouny, "Syria's Islamist rebels join forces against Assad," Reuters, 11 October 2012.

right. They advocate for a secular state vaguely guided by principles in Islamic law rather than by those laws themselves.[21] Some Brotherhood groups are part of the FSA, while others, such as Liwa' al-Tawhid, are nominally part of the FSA but declare themselves outside the FSA's command structure. The Brotherhood's agenda is not always clear and is complicated by the relatively recent empowerment of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Although the Syrian Brotherhood is independent from the Egyptian branch, many rebels fear that it could end up dominating post-Baathist Syria like the Brotherhood has in Egypt since the fall of Hosni Mubarak. For this reason, fear of Brotherhood machinations has undermined attempts at unifying the Syrian opposition, and was partly to blame for much of the infighting within the Syrian National Council.[22]

Finally, there are the secular rebels, who, like their amorphous Islamist counterparts, do not advocate a distinct political ideology like Baathism but instead insist on a secular, democratic state. However, many of these groups also advocate a Sunni majoritarian perspective. Although most outwardly reject any sectarianism, the idea that they are fighting a largely Alawite regime has fostered increasing resentment against Syria's non-Sunni, and particularly Alawite, minority communities.[23] Most of the secular groups are part of the Free Syrian Army, and can be found throughout the Syrian zones of rebellion.[24]

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[21] See the Syrian Brotherhood's 2004 "Political Project for the Future" and its 2012 "Covenant and Charter." Both documents are available in Arabic on the group's website:
http://www.ikhwansyria.com/Portals/Category/?Name=%D9%88%D8%AB%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%82%20%D9%88%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA&info=YVdROU1UTTVKbk52ZFhKalpUUMURRVlJGUjA5U1dTWjBlWEJsUFRZbWVHMXNhV1E5Smc9PSt1.Syr.

[22] Monalisa Freiha, "The Brotherhood and the Lion's Share," *An-Nahar* (Lebanon), 12 December 2012,
http://newspaper.annahar.com/article.php?t=arab&p=3&d=24933 (in Arabic); translation by *Al-Monitor*, 13 December 2012,
http://newspaper.annahar.com/article.php?t=arab&p=3&d=24933.

[23] See interview with Latakia-based FSA battalion commander, Abu Adnan, on the conflicted view of Alawites among secular Sunni rebels in the fight against Asad. Karen Leigh, "Interview: I'm an FSA Battalion lead-

From the preceding discussion, we can distinguish four categories of Sunni Arab rebels based on their political goals and allegiances: Salafis, Muslim Brotherhood aligned groups, amorphous Islamists, and secularists. Most of the people in each category are local Syrians, but they have also attracted foreign donors and manpower. Salafi militant groups have in particular benefited from the infusion of foreign volunteers to man their ranks. Some groups from each category are in the FSA, and some are outside of it. In a rough comparison, the Salafis have the fewest groups in the FSA, followed by the amorphous Islamists, then groups associated with the Brotherhood, and finally the secularists, which have the most. This distribution makes sense given that the FSA's original founders were secular-minded military officers who had defected from the Asad regime. For this reason, much of the tension between Sunni rebel groups lies between groups with conflicting goals, such as the largely non-FSA-aligned Salafis and the pro-FSA secular groups.

## Funding the rebellion

Although differing goals have helped fracture Syria's opposition, limited and unequal access to resources via external support has also played an important role. It is unclear precisely when foreign support started to make an impact in Syria; however, there were reports from as early as January 2012 that Saudi Arabia and Qatar had decided to fund rebels to help them acquire weapons.[25] In March, Kuwait's Parliament passed a nonbinding resolution urging the Kuwaiti gov-

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er," *Syria Deeply*, 25 January 2013, http://beta.syriadeeply.org/2013/01/interview-fsa-battalion-leader/#.USUdJB1lGSo. Also see Paul Wood's reporting from Syria, "A Tour Inside Syria's Insurgency," *Atlantic*, 29 December 2011, http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/12/a-tour-inside-syrias-insurgency/250654/.

[24] Lina Sinjab, "Syria Crisis: Discord Grows between Islamist and Secular Rebels," *BBC News*, 25 October 2012.

[25] James Hider, "Gulf Countries 'Have Secret Arms Deal with Resistance,'" *Times* (London), 26 January 2012; Justin Vela, "Arab States Arm Rebels as UN Talks of Syrian Civil War," 13 June 2012.

ernment to arm the rebels.[26] Jordan and Turkey were reluctant to allow heavy weapons to cross their borders, fearing that it would escalate the violence.[27] But their reticence melted away as the regime's violence and brutality increased over the spring and summer. By June, there were indications that Turkey's intelligence agency was helping Qatar and Saudi Arabia transport weapons into Syria; Jordan made a similar shift in its strategy.[28] The Turks also reportedly set up a training base for the FSA in or near the U.S. air base at Incirlik.[29] For Ankara, the Houla Massacre the previous month seems to have been the point of no return.[30]

Initially, the United States and its Western European allies did not want weapons delivered to the rebels, as they shared Jordan and Turkey's fears of exacerbating the conflict.[31] But by late spring, the United States had altered its stance and began encouraging Qatar and Saudi Arabia to provide weapons and helping the two countries send the right weapons to the right groups. There were reports, however, that the U.S. government discouraged its regional allies over the past year from supplying heavy weapons and that the CIA directly inter-

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[26] Karen DeYoung, "Arab Plans May Leave U.S. Caution in Dust," *Washington Post*, 2 March 2012.

[27] Alex Spillius, "How Do We Help Get Rid of President Bashar al-Assad?" *Telegraph*, 7 February 2012; Anne Barnard, "Disagreements among Syrian Rebels Over Foreign Arms Shipments," *New York Times*, 31 March 2012; Muhammad al-Najjar, "Will Jordan Accept a Secret Role in Syria," *Aljazeera.net*, April 4, 2012 (translated by BBC Monitoring, 5 April 2012).

[28] Vela, "Arab States Arm Rebels;" John Densky, "Smugglers' Routes from Turkey That Could Be a Deciding Factor for Syria's Uprising," 23 June 2012.

[29] Seumas Milne, "Comment: Intervention Is Now Driving Syria's Descent into Darkness," *Guardian*, 8 August 2012.

[30] Anthony Loyd, "Scales of Uprising Begin to Tip Against Assad," *Times* (London), 26 June 2012.

[31] al-Najjar, "Will Jordan Accept a Secret Role in Syria?"; Deborah Haynes, "Imam Urges Britain to Arm Syrian Rebels," *The (UK) Times*, 18 June 2012.

vened to ensure that heavy anti-tank or anti-air weapons did not cross into Syria.[32]

Saudi Arabia and Qatar at first sought to deliver weapons and funds to the Free Syrian Army. The conduit was the Syrian National Council, the leading exile opposition body early in the uprising. Although the SNC had initially opposed a violent uprising, it changed its stance in March 2012, announcing that it would form a ministry of defense to unite the armed opposition under the SNC's control.[33] Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait all pledged funds to the SNC to pay rebel fighters in the FSA.[34] Libya also gave funds to the Syrian National Council, reportedly surpassing both Qatar and the UAE in its level of support.[35]

Nevertheless, the SNC struggled to win over the opposition in Syria. Based in Turkey and made up of expatriates living outside Syria, the SNC was often viewed with suspicion by both the commanders of the Free Syrian Army fighting in Syria and others who saw it as a front for the Muslim Brotherhood.[36] Undoubtedly, Brotherhood influence on

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[32] James Hider and Catherine Philip, "Gulf States Send Arms to Rebels with Help from US," *Times* (London), 17 May 2012; Hugh Tomlinson, "Money and Arms Now Flowing to Rebel Army," *Times* (London), 28 May 2012; Richard Willis, "Syrian Opposition Receiving Arms Through country's Neighbors," *Jerusalem Post*, 18 July 2012; Milne, "Comment: Intervention"; John Follain, "CIA Chokes Rebels' Weapon Supply Amid Islamist Fears," *Sunday Times* (London), 12 August 2012; Kevin Sullivan, "Saudis Line Up Against Syrian Regime," *Washington Post*, 8 October 2012; Abdullah Bozkurt, "Turkey Should Arm the Opposition in Syria," *Today's Zaman*, 20 November 2012.

[33] DeYoung, "Arab Plans May Leave U.S. Caution in Dust"; "Syrian Opposition Demands Foreign Arms, Not Fighters," *Today's Zaman*, 23 November 2012.

[34] Karen DeYoung, "Arab States Agree to Pay Millions to Opposition Fighters in Syria," *Washington Post*, 2 April 2012; Tomlinson, "Money and Arms"; Patrick McDonnell, "The War Room on the Border," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 July 2012.

[35] Borzou Daraghi, "War-Ravaged Libya Is the Key Funder of Syrian Opposition," *Washington Post*, 6 November 2012.

[36] Kim Sengupta, "United Against a Common Enemy? Syria's Breakaway Factions," *Independent*, 8 March 2012; DeYoung, "Arab States Agree to Pay

the council was substantial, as it held one quarter of the seats on the SNC over the past year.[37] Until recently, the Brotherhood also blocked efforts to dilute its power by merging the SNC with opposition groups inside Syria.[38] The Kurds have been particularly suspicious of Brotherhood influence on the SNC and the body's close connection to Turkey, viewing both as inimical to Kurdish autonomy.[39]

Groups hostile to the Brotherhood allege that its members on the SNC used money the body received from Saudi, Qatar, and Turkey to rebuild the Brotherhood network in Syria by channeling it to groups who pledged them loyalty.[40] There are also indications that the Brotherhood has channeled money and weapons from private citizens to its favorite groups in Syria, including some groups that have been reportedly stockpiling materiel in expectation of a possible post-Asad fight.[41] Even if many of these groups nominally fight under the

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Millions"; Ian Black, "Syria: Divided Rebels Look Beyond Overthrow of Assad Regime," *Guardian*, 26 July 2012.

[37] Ruth Sherlock and Richard Spencer, "Syrian Opposition Undermined by Splits and Infighting, Emails Show," *Telegraph*, 22 April 2012.

[38] Michael Jansen, "Deep Divisions in Opposition Over Route to Democracy," *Irish Times*, 11 May 2012.

[39] Jonathan Spyer, "Turks Fear Prospect of 'Kurdish Spring,'" *Jerusalem Post*, 10 August 2012; "Syrian Kurds' Rise Stirs Regional Concern," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 October 2012. On Turkey's backing of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, see Anne Barnard and Hania Mourtada, "Rebels Announce Move of Headquarters from Turkey to 'Liberated' Syria Territory," *New York Times*, 23 September 2012.

[40] Sherlock and Spencer, "Syrian Opposition Undermined;" Vela, "Arab States Arm Rebels"; "Syrian Activists Announce New Leadership," *Telegraph*, 22 June 2012; Michael Jansen, "Patchwork of Political Aims Evident in Rebel Groups," *Irish Times*, 20 July 2012; Martin Chulov, "In the Wreckage of Syria, Who Can Be Trusted with the Future?" *Observer*, 22 July 2012; Black, "Syria: Divided Rebels."

[41] Karen DeYoung, "Arms Flow to Syrian Rebels," *Washington Post*, 16 May 2012; Tom Coghlan, "Islamists and Criminals 'Rob Revolution of Its Democracy," *Times* (London), 6 August 2012; "Rifts Are Weakening Unity of Syrian Rebel Groups," AFP, 20 August 2012; Sheera Frenkel, "Syrian Rebels Squabble Over Weapons as Biggest Shipload Arrives from Libya," *Times* (London), 14 September 2012; and Sheera Frenkel,

banner of the Free Syrian Army, they do not necessarily answer to its leadership. The head of the Brotherhood-funded Tawhid Battalion in Aleppo declared in August 2012 that it was independent of FSA leadership despite fighting under its banner.[42] The Brotherhood's suspected manipulation of external funding has been a source of discord within the SNC. For example, in March 2012, a number of major opposition leaders left the SNC in protest over the dominance of the Brotherhood and its unwillingness to centralize financing for the rebels because it wanted to control the flow of money to the FSA.[43]

By the summer of 2012, some of the Gulf countries decided that the SNC was too ineffectual at distributing money and arms.[44] To overcome this infighting and the dominance of the Brotherhood on the SNC, the FSA set up its own political front, the Syrian Support Group (SSG), to directly receive funds and weapons. By late summer, Saudi Arabia had become its primary backer, with Qatar and Turkey continuing to support the SNC. According to numerous press reports, the split in funding only served to reinforce factionalism among the rebels.[45]

"Brotherhood 'Buying Influence with Arms,'" *Times* (London), September 14, 2012.

[42] "Rifts Are Weakening Unity of Syrian Rebel Groups," AFP, 20 August 2012.

[43] Anne Barnard, "Syria Opposition Group is Routed and Divided," *New York Times*, 15 March 2012; Barnard, "Disagreements Among Syrian Rebels"; Vela, "Arab States Arm Rebels."

[44] Chulov, "In the Wreckage of Syria, Who Can Be Trusted with the Future?"

[45] Rush Sherlock and Richard Spencer, "Muslim Brotherhood Establishes Militia Inside Syria," *Telegraph*, 3 August 2012; Ruth Sherlock, "Saudi Millions and Special Forces Expertise turn Syria's Rebels into a Fighting Force," *Telegraph*, 21 September 2012; Ruth Sherlock, "Syria Dispatch: Rebel fighters Fear the Growing Influence of Their 'Bin Laden' Faction," *Telegraph*, 13 October 2012; and Neil MacFarquhar, "With Eye on Foreign Aid, Syrian Opposition Groups Sign a Unity Deal," *New York Times*, 12 November 2012. The same dysfunction that led to the formation of the SGG is noted by Paul McGeough ("The West Searches in Vain for Conflict's Good Guys," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 September 2012), but he believes that the body is Qatari backed.

By October 2012, Turkey and Qatar reportedly told the rebels that they would not supply heavy weapons until the opposition united in a single command structure.[46] In November, opposition members established the National Coalition for Revolutionary Forces and the Syrian Opposition, which was intended to supplant the SNC as the lone entity responsible for coordinating the military and political affairs of the opposition. The United States, Britain, France, the European Union, Turkey, and the GCC backed the creation of the body, and Qatar and Saudi Arabia agreed to channel weapons through it.[47] Although the Brotherhood was given a diminished role in the new body,[48] a third of the seats in the coalition went to the Brotherhood-dominated SNC.[49]

Rebel groups aligned with the Brotherhood also gained influence in the new military structure of the FSA.[50] Pressured by Qatar and Saudi Arabia, FSA military commanders agreed in December to form a unified command structure under a 30-member Supreme Military Council with a chief of staff. In a break with the FSA's previous structure, the new body was to be dominated by field commanders, who presumably had more credibility in the ranks. But, as one commander remarked, the structure would only hold if the commanders began

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[46] "Turkey, Qatar Cut Arms Supply Until Divided Syrian Factions Unite," *Today's Zaman*, 1 October 2012. There were also reports that Qatar hesitated to provide the heavy arms until the Syrian rebels could create a centralized military leadership. See Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, "Rebels Acquire Rockets to Blast Syrian Tanks," *Sunday Times*, 15 April 2012; and Hider and Philip, "Gulf States Send Arms to Rebels." According to a source in Doha who saw the government's plans, Qatar is giving anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles and is also encouraging the fighters it armed in Libya to bring their weapons and experience to Syria. See Ian Black and Julian Borger, "Arming Syrian Rebels Will Undermine UN's Peace Efforts, Gulf States Told," *Guardian*, 6 April 2012.

[47] Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Syrian Opposition Groups Forms New Coalition," *Washington Post*, 12 November 2012; David Ignatius, "Rebel Fighters at Cross Purposes," *Washington Post*, 25 November 2012.

[48] Neil MacFarquhar, "With Eye on Foreign Aid."

[49] Jonathan Spyer, "The Revolt of Islam in Syria," *Jerusalem Post*, 14 December 2012.

[50] Ibid.

to receive rockets and missiles from the council.[51] Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which had been at odds over the previous year, committed themselves to funneling weapons and money through the Supreme Military Council.[52]

Assistance from Saudi Arabia and Qatar was initially slow to reach the rebels,[53] which caused rebel groups to begin relying on private donations from Syrian ex-pats and private citizens in the Gulf.[54] But by June groups had begun to receive a limited number of antitank missiles sent from Turkey and financed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.[55] Many of these weapons seem to have come from stockpiles in Libya bought by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.[56] Also, rebels have seized anti-aircraft weapons from Syrian forces on the ground.[57]

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[51] Neil MacFarquhar and Hwaida Saad, "Rebel Groups in Syria Make Framework for Military," *New York Times*, 8 December 2012.

[52] "Muhammad Ballut, "Unified Command of Five Syrian Armed Fronts Sponsored by Bandar, Al-Atiyah," *Al-Safir* website, 10 December 2012 (translated by BBC Monitoring on 13 December 2012).

[53] Deborah Haynes and Laura Pitel, "Syria Rebels Demand Action from Allies Who Have Broken their Promises of Aid," *The Times*, 4 May 2012; Jansen, "Deep Divisions in Opposition"; Nicholas Watt and Martin Chulov, "Front: Al-Qaida Affiliates Operating in Syria, Says Hague," *Guardian*, 12 June 2012.

[54] Hider and Philip, "Gulf States Send Arms to Rebels"; Mark Landler and Neil MacFarquhar, "Heavier Weapons Push Syrian Crisis toward Civil War," *New York Times*, 13 June 2012.

[55] Landler and MacFarquhar, "Heavier Weapons Push Syrian Crisis."

[56] Peter Foster and Ruth Sherlock, "US Holds High-Level Talks with Syrian Rebels Seeking Weapons in Washington," *The Telegraph*, 15 June 2012; Frenkel, "Syrian Rebels Squabble Over Weapons; and Frenkel, "Brotherhood 'Buying Influence with Arms.""

[57] Trudy Rubin, "U.S. Still Refusing to Aid Rebels," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 9 December 2012.

Private funding still flows to favorite groups,[58] undermining the chances for the creation of a larger fighting force. As one Syrian financier put it,

> The local brigade commanders on the ground swear allegiance to whoever supports them and the expat community sending them money is divided. These are [Syrian] expats in the States and the Gulf using their own trusted channels for getting money through, so the money is pouring in from many different pockets. The number of fighters each commander can summon wax and wane with his ability to arm and pay them and their families, so there is no particular leader with enough clout to bring the brigades together…. All the other money comes from multiple sources and multiple channels. You can only unify these units with a unified source of money.[59]

Money coming from conservative citizens in the Gulf is leading some groups to emphasize their religious identity in order to attract religiously-motivated sponsors.[60] A lot of the money has gone to overtly Salafi groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham,[61] leading to complaints by FSA commanders that the Salafi groups are better armed than they are.[62] Because the Salafi groups have their own independent sources of funding and weapons, they have resisted formal alliances with groups that do not share their political agendas or conservative creed. Ahrar al-Sham, for example, has formed its own Islamist alliance. According to the group's spokesman, Ahrar al-Sham receives money from Syrian expats in the Gulf as well as Arabs and charitable sources internation-

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[58] John Follain and David Leppard, "Syria Rebels Aided by UK," *Sunday Times*, 19 August 2012; Sherlock, "Syria Dispatch"; Seamus Mirodan, "Syrian Rebels Go Shopping for Supplies and Bomb-Making Equipment on Trips to Turkey," *Irish Times*, 14 November 2012.

[59] Julian Borger, "West Seeks New Syrians to Back," *Australian Financial Review*, 15 August 2012.

[60] Frenkel, "'We could be at war forever.'"

[61] David Ignatius, "Whose Revolution?" *Washington Post*, 8 October 2012; Sherlock, "Syria Dispatch."

[62] "*Idlib: al-Lihya al-mahalli li-Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham tu`iq altihaqaha bil-jihad al-`alimi*" ("Idlbi: The Local Beard of the Ahrar al-Sham Brigades Prevents It from Joining the Global Jihad"), *al-Hayat*, 21 August 2012, http://alhayat.com/Details/427912 (last accessed 8 Oct. 2012).

ally.[63] News outlets have reported that the group gets most of its money from private donors in Kuwait.[64] Ahrar al-Sham partially confirmed this when it issued a statement on its Facebook page on 31 August 2012, detailing how much money it had received from a Kuwaiti committee set up to support the Syrian rebels.

Syrian expats are another major source of private funding. For example, an estimated 400,000 to 1 million Syrians work in Saudi Arabia, half of whom live in Jeddah. Thirty members of the SNC are Syrians living in Saudi Arabia, and an estimated 90,000 more Syrians have fled the conflict to stay with family in the kingdom.[65] The Saudi government reportedly leaves them alone to send money to the FSA.[66] In July 2012, Syrian citizens, together with members of the Saudi royal family, raised between $30 million and $150 million for the "support of the brothers in Syria."[67] It is unclear how, to what extent, and to whom in Syria these funds have been distributed.

Saudi Arabia has tried to clamp down on the private funding going to the most radical Islamist groups in Syria.[68] When a group of Islamic scholars in Saudi Arabia set up a committee to collect private funds for the Syrian rebels, the Saudi Intelligence Security Agency asked them to stop and sign a pledge to that effect. They also announced their pledge over the Internet.[69] The government has clamped down

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[63] Hazim al-Amin, "'Al-Islamiyyun' al-akthar tanziman wa tamwilan wa ghumudan wa'l-aqall `adadan wa nufudhan" ("The 'Islamists' are the most organized, well-financed, and obscure and the least numerous and influential"), *al-Hayat*, 14 August 2012, http://alhayat.com/Details/426355 (last accessed February 18, 2013).

[64] Erika Solomon, "Syria rebels see future fight with foreign radicals," Reuters, 8 August 2012; Rania Abouzeid, "Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels: Who Are the Qataris Arming?" *Time*, 18 September 2012.

[65] Willis, "Syrian Opposition Receiving Arms"; Sullivan, "Saudis Line Up."

[66] Willis, "Syrian Opposition Receiving Arms."

[67] Roger Boyes, "Not-So-Secretive Intelligence Chief Will Cheer for Syrian Rebels and US," *Times*, 28 July 2012; Sullivan, "Saudis Line Up."

[68] Willis, "Syrian Opposition Receiving Arms."

[69] "Saudi Arabia and the Support for the Syrian Uprising," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 29 May 2012 (translated by BBC Monitoring on 2 June 2012).

on clerics who are encouraging young Saudi men to go fight in Syria as well.[70] In contrast, the Kuwaiti government has not moved to stop private fund raising for Salafi groups in Syria, probably because it lacks the legal authority to do so and because it cannot afford to alienate its domestic Salafi opposition, which has been leading the opposition to the royal family's rule. As a result, Salafis in Kuwait are sending millions of dollars to like-minded militants in Syria—a funding advantage that appears to have given Salafi groups an edge in resource acquisition.

## Alliance building among Syria's rebels

Credible and deep alliance building remains limited in Syria. This is partly due to factors such as local disputes, personality clashes, mistrust between group leaders, and a host of other conflicting parochial interests.[71] However, as we have suggested above, divergent goals and resources have likely played a significant role in determining how and to what extent rebel groups in Syria interact. The low (*cordial*) to middle (*cooperative*) levels of relations that have taken place between rebels have generally occurred between groups with similar goals and resources. This is the case with the multitude of local groups that have low levels of resources or limited access to resources. While a network of low-level interactions is what has made small groups into a large segment of the opposition, most groups' reflexive desire for autonomy seems to have prevented deeper ties from forming and prevented coalitions such as the FSA from coalescing into a more centralized, unified, and effective force.

Divergent goals have similarly divided Syria's rebels. Differing short-term goals have led to the abundance of small groups with often parochial agendas. However, disagreement on long-term goals has perhaps been a bigger problem. Groups with divergent long-term goals and similar short-term objectives have at times coordinated at the tactical and operational levels—signs of a deeper *coordination* alliance—but this has been limited. For instance, amorphous Islamist and secu-

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[70] Sullivan, "Saudis Line Up."

[71] On how parochial interests help fracture the rebellion, see Gaith Abdul-Ahad's reporting from Aleppo, "How to Start a Battalion."

lar groups, often under the rubric of the FSA, have coordinated tactically during high points of fighting in areas such as Aleppo.[72] Yet, when there is a large ideological disparity between groups, meaningful interaction seems to be less common. This is the case between secular groups and the major Salafi organizations, which largely seem to avoid cooperating with each other, partly out of differences in their respective ideas for Syria's future. Relations between these groups seem to be low and are probably best described as *cordial* alliances, where the groups tolerate each other but, due to mutual mistrust, tend not to interact.

Differing goals impact not only how groups see each other but also how outside donors see them. As we have discussed, foreign states have largely directed their support to groups associated with the FSA and, more recently, to the Supreme Military Council. Yet Saudi Arabia has avoided funding Brotherhood elements, whereas Qatar has not. Even when resources are delivered to Syria, reporting on the ground suggests that they are not being distributed effectively—sometimes they are channeled to one or two major players, hoarded by certain rebel leaders, or stolen by criminal elements and resold to the highest bidder.[73] Wealthy private donors outside of Syria have also become important players. Some, particularly Syrian expats, appear to send their funds to trusted agents and often their own relatives on the ground. Others, especially individuals in Gulf states such as Kuwait, have put their backing behind Salafi groups. With a multitude of small groups from all segments of the rebellion having some access to resources, they have less impetus to seek deeper ties with each other than they might have if the vast majority of resources were controlled by only a few entities.

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[72] See for instance, Marc Burleigh, "Syria rebels planning to break Aleppo deadlock," *Agence France-Presse*, 17 January 2013, http://www.rappler.com/world/19903-syria-rebels-planning-to-break-aleppo-deadlock.

[73] Ibid. Also see Raja Abdulrahim, "Syria rebels say they don't have the weapons to end the war," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 February 2013, http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/middleeast/la-fg-syria-weapons-20130220,0,5365909.story

Although rebel commanders complain about the lack of resources, the ability to gain *access* to low-level resources seems to be something that even small groups can manage to do without developing deep alliances with larger groups. This seems to be one factor that has caused the rebel forces to fracture into smaller and smaller elements and prevented deeper—*coordination* and *militarized*—alliances from forming between most rebel groups. For instance, an aspiring local commander from Aleppo explains to another battalion leader why he is splitting from the latter's unit and starting his own group:

> A very good man, a seeker of good deeds – he is from our town but he lives in the Gulf – told me he would fund my new battalion. He says he will pay for our ammunition and we get to keep all the spoils of the fighting. We just have to supply him with videos… He wants to appease God, and he wants us to give him videos of all our operations. That's all – just YouTube videos.[74]

Thus, for the aspiring commander, the prospect and potential benefits of greater autonomy appear to be sufficient motivation to leave and start his own group. This follows Furtado's argument that groups with similar resource levels are less inclined to seek deeper alliances with each other. The reason is that groups tend to value their autonomy over alliances that do not guarantee access to significantly higher levels of resources. This may be one factor that has stymied progress toward unification and driven the trend of further division among Syria's rebels.

However, it appears that even in this climate shared long-term goals can bring groups together and lead to the development of deeper and more credible ties. This seems to be what has occurred within the Salafi segments of the rebellion. Salafi militants share specific ideological commitments that are in many ways quite different from those of the other major rebel constituencies. With firm commitments to the centrality of Islamic law, the importance of Islamic mores governing all aspects of society, and a deep-seated suspicion of the Muslim Brotherhood and secularists, Salafi groups seem to have had an easier time than their counterparts in forming credible alliances with each other. While it is almost certain that parochial interests

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[74] Abdul-Ahad, "How to Start a Battalion."

could also undermine a complete coming together of Salafi organizations, shared ideological commitments seem to have paved the way for the development of deeper alliances within major Salafi factions like the Syrian Islamic Front.

In addition to shared goals, Salafis have been continually successful in attracting external support. Early in the conflict, the groups associated with the FSA and the Muslim Brotherhood enjoyed the lion's share of outside support. Yet the ineffective distribution of resources has led many small groups to seek patronage from private donors. Private money seems to have enabled Salafi groups to acquire at least the same, or even higher, levels of resources as the other major factions. Although it is difficult to know precisely, on-the-ground reporting and continuous complaints from FSA commanders suggest that Salafis are indeed outpacing others in the acquisition of resources.[75] With steady access to resources, smaller unaligned groups could be motivated to join forces or at least seek *cooperative* and *coordination* alliances with better-funded Salafis. We have evidence that smaller groups have donned the guise and begun to advocate the Salafi ideology to attract private donors. U. S. House Intelligence Committee Chairman, Rep. Mike Rogers, also touched on this issue: "Certain elements of the rebels are reaching across to these jihadist units, because they tend to be armed and effective and committed fighters, which is more than they can say for their own units at times."[76] It would follow that those groups that have adopted the goals of the leading Salafi organizations could also seek deeper ties with them. This is perhaps in part what has fueled the growth of the Salafi factions, which have continued to increase in size and importance throughout the conflict.

Over time, shared goals and effective access to resources should continue to help Salafi groups engage in deeper levels of cooperation and form more credible alliances with one another. So far, it appears

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[75] See Abdulrahim, "Syria rebels say they don't have the weapons"; also, Abdul-Ahad, "How to Start a Battalion."

[76] Chris Lawrence, "Syrian Rebels said to Cut Deals for Arms from Extremists," CNN, 17 October 2012,
http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/10/17/syrian-jihadists-getting-weapons.

that Salafi elements have been able to translate their greater resources and likely more credible inter-group ties into success on the battlefield and growing notoriety. For instance, Salafis have become a dominant force in the Aleppo theater and were able to lead—in coordination with other Islamist groups—major victories against regime forces at a military base near Aleppo and at the critical Al-Tabqa hydroelectric dam.[77] Such successes should not only benefit group cohesion and morale, but also make Salafi groups more credible targets for private foreign aid.

In sum, deeper cooperation and shared goals have likely made the Salafis a more coherent bloc than other rebel factions. However, so long as smaller Salafi groups can maintain access to individual lines of outside support, a more dramatic coming together of Salafi groups through a *militarized* alliance or the absolute absorption of smaller groups into a few major Salafi organizations will likely not take place. Thus, similar to other major factions, the Salafis probably will remain divided to some degree by parochial interests.

# Conclusion: What does this mean for Syria's conflict and its future?

The inherent murkiness of civil wars makes it impossible to develop a perfect understanding of the complex dynamics that define them and decide their outcome. The case of Syria is no different: we cannot extrapolate from current evidence and make confident arguments about where the civil war is headed. However, the theoretical framework that we have used in this report gives us a sense of how goals and resources can affect rebel group interaction and impact Syria's civil war more broadly.

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[77] See Bill Roggio, "Al Nusrah Front, foreign jihadists overrun another Syrian military base," *Long War Journal*, 13 February 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/02/al_nusrah_front_fore.php; also, Hwaida Saad and Rick Gladstone, "Syrian Insurgents Claim to Control Large Hydropower Dam," *New York Times*, 11 February 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/12/world/middleeast/syrian-insurgents-claim-to-control-large-hydropower-dam.html.

Drawing from what we know of rebel alliance building in Syria, we highlight a few trends that suggest where the Syrian conflict might be headed. It is important to note that while these trends are rooted in the theoretical framework used in this study, they are rough sketches of what might lie ahead and are not meant to be firm prognostications. It is impossible to predict the life cycle and dimensions of war, and we are not attempting to do so here.[78] However, our examination of rebel alliance building and its impact on civil war could be useful in identifying possible trajectories of the Syrian conflict. To that end, we offer a few key findings:

***The presence of multiple groups with low levels of cooperation and independent access to external support could lengthen the duration of the Syrian conflict.*** The immense numbers of groups fighting the regime has already factored into the way that the conflict has played out. Unable to concentrate on a single, unified enemy, Asad's forces have had to divide their assets, fight on multiple fronts, and engage enemy forces in difficult urban theaters. This not only has made defeat of the opposition more difficult for Asad but also has made it easier for small rebel groups to carve out a niche for themselves in the conflict.

Added to this, external funding from both foreign states and wealthy private donors has introduced an ongoing stream of resources into Syria. So long as small rebel groups can maintain access to these resources, either by aligning themselves with larger groups or by establishing their own lines of patronage, these groups can continue to pay fighters and obtain a certain level of critical materiel (from firearms and ammunition, to larger ordnance), and thus continue fighting. If these factors stay the same, it is likely that small groups will continue to favor autonomy over forming deeper alliances.

***Rebel victory will prove more difficult without the development of deeper alliances. The failure to establish strong credible alliances could also lead to more post-conflict instability should the rebels defeat Asad.*** While the pres-

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[78] For instance, a possible shift in the conflict, such as if Asad were to retake and *hold* key rebel areas, could change both a group's goals and possibly its access to resources; however, it is impossible to accurately predict such changes, not to mention their impact on inter-group alliance-building.

ence of multiple small groups makes it more difficult for Asad to win, it will likely also make it more difficult for the rebels to fully prevail over the regime. It is perhaps partly for this reason that the conflict has dragged on for so long, despite immense external support and an overwhelming demographic advantage for the rebels. It is likely that a more unified opposition, with a more centralized leadership, a more coherent command structure, and more effective distribution of resources would be able to engineer a more effective fight against the Asad regime.

Such unification would be reliant on the development of strong, credible alliances between Syria's disparate groups. What we have seen is that divergent goals and the ability for small groups to gain external support have stymied a coming together of the major rebel factions. Although groups will probably continue to cooperate on certain levels until Asad falls, it is likely that whatever cleavages separate the rebels now will become points of outright contention and competition in the aftermath of a rebel victory. The international push for opposition unity has not proved successful, and it is unlikely that rebel factions will have the impetus to unite should current trends continue.

*Access to higher levels of resources would have the most significant impact on the conflict and would make rebel victory more likely.* Even though arms and money are finding their way to Syria's rebels, the current level of resources has given the rebels only a slight edge against regime forces. Rebels are able to take and hold certain urban areas, but they are reliant on asymmetrical tactics (such as suicide bombings) to take the fight to Asad. Collectively, the rebels have little means or ability to counter the regime's air superiority and mechanized ground units. The introduction of more advanced weaponry and access to better training would make a significant difference in the fight and could give the rebels a distinct advantage. This would be especially effective if they were given a considerable number of anti-air and anti-tank weapons.

*However, the presence of greater resources could also create more competition between rebel groups, especially those with divergent goals.* Access to greater resources not only would give a certain rebel faction an advantage in the fight against the regime but also would give it an advantage against other rebels. Resource asymmetry might not cause

competition while all rebel groups are focused on defeating Asad; but if the rebels were to be victorious, it would likely be a source of contention afterwards. Thus, it seems likely that in the absence of deeper alliances, divergent goals and resource inequality could become points of contention and lead to infighting between rebel groups if Asad is defeated.

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